

VISIT THE JOHN ADAMS COURTHOUSE

Teachers and students of all ages are invited to visit the historic John Adams Courthouse, headquarters of the Massachusetts judicial branch. Conveniently located on Pemberton Square between the Massachusetts State House and Government Center, the John Adams Courthouse houses the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, the Massachusetts Appeals Court, and the Social Law Library, the nation's oldest law library. The John Adams Courthouse is generally open for visitors on normal business days, Monday through Friday from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Court sessions are open to the public.

In keeping with John Adams's passion for justice, community and learning, the John Adams Courthouse offers a variety of free educational opportunities for educators and students to learn about the judicial branch of government, John Adams and the Massachusetts Constitution, legal history, and the historic preservation of a stunning 19th century courthouse. Educational exhibits and meeting areas are available in the courthouse. Group tours, observations of court sessions, and meetings with judges, lawyers, and court officials can be arranged in advance.

Some Field Trip opportunities and ideas are presented below. Several of these suggestions take advantage of the Courthouse's immediate proximity to the Massachusetts State House, the Suffolk County Courthouse in Pemberton Square, and the Freedom Trail. The Freedom Trail will give students a broad view of colonial Boston and how the colony's struggles with Great Britain led directly to the drafting of the Massachusetts Constitution. The John Adams Courthouse is located near many of the Freedom Trail sites.

Group Tours

In partnership with Discovering Justice, a Boston-based, non-profit educational organization, the John Adams Courthouse offers free tours with trained docents who provide lively narrations of court history, art and architecture, and pertinent information about the judicial system. Tours generally take about one hour and include visits to the courtrooms where the Supreme Judicial Court and Appeals Court Justices hear oral arguments. The Great Hall contains educational exhibits where students can learn about John Adams and the drafting of the Massachusetts Constitution. Students can sit on the original bench (still in use) in the courtroom where Chief Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes and the Supreme Judicial Court Justices sat more than one hundred years ago. Tour request forms are available by calling the Supreme Judicial Court Public Information Office at 617/557-1114 or Discovering Justice at 617/748-4125.

Court Sessions

The Supreme Judicial Court hears oral arguments the first week of every month from September through May from 9:00 a.m. to approximately 1:00 p.m.. Single Justice sessions are held throughout the year at scheduled times. The Appeals Court, which sits in three-justice panels, also hears oral arguments throughout the year at scheduled times. Oral arguments for each case generally take about one half hour (fifteen minutes per side). The Justices issue written opinions (decisions) several weeks or months following oral arguments. The court schedules and lists of cases can be found at www.ma-appellatecourts.org. Court opinions can be found at www.massreports.com. Students are welcome to attend court sessions, which are open to the public, at any time, but teachers with more than ten students are requested to make advance arrangements by calling the Supreme Judicial Court Public Information Office at 617/557-1114. Teachers may also want to request a speaker (judge, lawyer, or court official) to meet with a class before or after a court sitting. These requests should be made several weeks before the scheduled visit. All arguments before the Supreme Judicial Court are also broadcast over the Internet. Please see the windowpane entitled Listen to Oral Arguments Online.

A field trip might also include a visit to both the John Adams Courthouse and the Suffolk County Courthouse located next door in Pemberton Square. After learning about the judicial system at the John Adams Courthouse, students may observe a Superior Court trial. With rare exceptions (e.g. certain juvenile proceedings), all trials – civil and criminal, jury and non-jury, are open to the public. Please call the Supreme Judicial Court Public Information Office at 617/557-1114 to make advance arrangements.

Legal History Displays

Two exhibits rooms located in the Great Hall of the John Adams Courthouse are open to the public during normal business hours. The current exhibits are entitled “A Mighty Invention: The Massachusetts Constitution of 1780” and “John Adams: The Law, the Nation and the Massachusetts Constitution.” These displays are also part of the public tours.

Historical Performances

In partnership with the Freedom Trail Foundation, dramatic performances by professional costumed actors are occasionally performed at the John Adams Courthouse to bring history to life. Several performances of “A Witness to A Massacre,” a lively dialogue between a man and a woman who witnessed the Boston Massacre, have been held at the courthouse for teachers, students, and the public. Following the performances, the actors, often joined by a judge, engage the audience in a discussion to relate the historic event to modern life. To arrange a tour conducted by the Freedom Trail Foundation that visits the John Adams Courthouse and sites along the Freedom Trail, please contact the Freedom Trail Foundation at www.thefreedomtrail.org. The Freedom Trail Foundation charges a per student fee for its guided tours.

Three Branches of Government Field Trip

Teachers may want to teach students about the interactions among the three branches of government and other civics lessons by combining a trip to the John Adams Courthouse to learn about the judicial system with a visit to the adjacent State House to view the legislative and executive branches in action. A good way to arrange a visit to the State House is to contact the Office of the Secretary of the Commonwealth, Office of State House Tours Division, at 617/727-3676. The office will also assist in contacting local legislators.